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PIONEER FLORIDA
by T. FREDERICK DAVIS

DESTRUCTION OF PORT LEON, 1843

Below the town of St. Marks and flanked on both sides by wide marsh, low, open pine land extends from back country roughly in the form of a V with its apex at the east bank of the St. Marks river. In this apex, two miles in a straight line and two and a half miles by boat from St. Marks, a purposed town named Port Leon was opened up with a public sale of lots May 3, 1838, coincident with the completion of the Tallahassee Railroad to St. Marks—(See “First Railroads” in this *Quarterly*, January, 1945). St. Marks had been the shipping point for that region for years and furnished sufficient depth of water for any vessel able to pass the bar at the mouth of the river, but the harbor was narrow and congested. Port Leon was conceived by the owners of the railroad with the idea that this situation would be improved and at the same time produce profits from leases and the sale of lots in the new development. Evidently these anticipations were in a measure verified, as an advertisement in the Tallahassee *Floridian*, dated December 7, 1839, notified the public that an extension of the railroad from St. Marks to Port Leon had been completed, and that another public sale of lots would take place at Port Leon on January 13, 1840.

In five years Port Leon had reached the small town class in resident population. The business interests were preponderantly maritime. Dockage and warehouses had been built, as well as dwellings for those whose business held them there. General

This is the eleventh of the “Pioneer Florida” series of historical sketches from contemporaneous sources, beginning in the October 1943 issue.

stores sufficient for local needs were in operation. There were two taverns. A small weekly paper had made its debut. The buildings were of frame construction, some of them flimsily erected. The highest ground elevation in the town was only a few feet above tidewater. Broadly, this was Port Leon the day before the frightful night of September 13, 1843.

About 11 A. M. Wednesday, September 13, 1843, the wind commenced blowing fresh from the southeast, bringing up a high tide, but nothing alarming. Late in the afternoon the wind lulled and the tide fell, but the weather continued threatening. Around 11 o'clock that night the wind again freshened and the tide commenced flowing. By midnight the gale was blowing with hurricane force. The whole town was inundated by a storm or tidal wave to a depth of seven to ten feet. The gale continued with unabated violence until 2 A. M. of the 14th, when the wind suddenly lulled for a few minutes, and then came from the southwest, with redoubled violence, and blew with gradually diminishing force until daylight. (This was a severe tropical storm of small diameter. The lull in the wind about 2 A. M. of the 14th, was the center or core of the hurricane passing over the town.)

"Our city is in ruins! We have been visited by one of the most horrible storms that it ever devolved upon us to chronicle." Every warehouse in the town was laid flat with the ground, except that of Hamlin & Snell's, and a part of that also was demolished. Nearly every dwelling was thrown from its foundation and many of them crushed to atoms. The merchants took what precautions they could for protection against high wind and water before the height of the storm, by moving their goods, as they

thought, out of danger. But the surging water and furious blasts were irresistible, and the goods in the stores were either destroyed or badly damaged. The store of Daniel Ladd was the least injured of any, although the water there was three feet above the counters; this building had the highest foundation of any in the town. Every dwelling house and store that was not demolished was left in a wretchedly shattered and filthy condition. Many of the citizens rendezvoused at the principal tavern before the storm struck in full force, and there waited in terrible anxiety and uncertainty its abatement. It was nothing less than a miracle that only one life was lost at Port Leon—a half-witted negro boy drowned.

The railroad between Port Leon and St. Marks was completely washed away, and considerable damage was done to the track north of St. Marks. All of the warehouses and most of the dwellings at St. Marks were destroyed, but no lives were lost. The railroad bridge across St. Marks River, a substantial structure built upon the self-suspension principle, supported by strong piers, was lifted bodily by the flood and carried some distance up the river, where it was left "an entire bridge yet, but in judiciously placed". All cottages in the miniature "summer resort" near the light house at the mouth of the St. Marks River between four and five miles below Port Leon, were washed away, with a toll of seven white occupants and five negro servants drowned. Little damage was done in Tallahassee twenty miles north of St. Marks.

(The tidal wave was the major hand in all of the destruction. There can be scarcely a doubt that many buildings would have survived the force of the wind alone.)

When they had recovered from the daze of the appalling catastrophe, the citizens of Port Leon held a mass meeting to determine what was best to do. The decision to abandon the place as a town site, salvage as much as possible, and move to another location, was practically unanimous. A committee was appointed to make a selection. A site on the west bank of the St. Marks River four miles above the town of St. Marks was chosen and named "Newport." The location was generally high above the reach of water and was considered healthful. Good roads would make it accessible. White Sulphur Springs, said to have medicinal value, were nearby. Off the waterfront there was sufficient depth for vessels light enough to pass the bar at the mouth of the river, and, withal, it was considered a much better berth for them than at Port Leon. Before the end of September, 1843, lots in Newport were being surveyed and plans were progressing for the erection of several warehouses. Thus another Territorial Florida small town flashed into existence.

This account, except where otherwise indicated, is derived from: Port Leon *Commercial Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1843-extract in *Niles' National Register*, Sept. 30, 1843; Tallahassee *Sentinel*, Sept. 19 and 26, 1843; *Niles' National Register*, Oct. 14, 1843.

FIRST MILITIA ORGANIZATION

The first militia muster in Florida after the formal transfer by Spain to the United States in 1821, for which we have a record, was the "Florida Rangers," organized in St. Augustine on or about August 1, 1826, with the following officers: Joseph Woodruff, captain; Joseph S. Sanchez, first lieutenant ; Joseph Elsourdi, second lieutenant ; William Taber, third lieutenant; John M. Fontane, ensign; B. A. Putnam, orderly sergeant. The editor of the St. Augustine *East Florida Herald*, August 8, 1826,

had this to say of the company: "Every laudable spirit deserves an honorable notice, and it gives us pleasure to extend a tribute of praise to the officers and members comprising a new company just organized in this city and called the Florida Rangers. It is but little more than a week since this company was proposed, and it now consists of about fifty members."

The first public appearance of the company was at the honorary funeral rites held in St. Augustine early in August, 1826, as an expression of respect for the departed patriots Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both of whom through singular coincidence died July 4, 1826, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Thirty members of the company were in uniform and performed an interesting part in the procession *-(op. cit.)*.

A premonition of coming trouble with the Seminole Indians, brought about by the murder of several members of the Carr family at their farm on the Aucilla River in December, 1826, inspired a general militia act by the legislative council of the Territory, approved January 20, 1827. Under this act, two brigades, to be composed of seven regiments were ordered organized, apportioned: First Regiment-Escambia and Walton counties; Second-St. Johns, Mosquito, and Monroe; Third-Jackson and Washington; Fourth-Duval and Nassau; Fifth-Gadsden; Sixth-Alachua; Seventh-Leon. The officers commissioned for the seven regiments so constituted were - (*Pensacola Gazette*, Feb. 9, 1827):

Regiment	Colonel	Lieut. Col.	Major
First	John de la Rúa	Joseph Noriega	vacant
Second	George Murray	Francis J. Fatio	John M. Hanson
Third	John M. Pope	William T. Kilbee	Vacant
Fourth	John Broward	John L. Doggett	James O'Neal
Fifth	Henry Yonge	Edward A. Robinson	James A. Wooten
Sixth	James Dell	Simeon Dell	William Colson
Seventh	James Gadsden	Achille Murat	Richard C. Allen
Adjutant-general	Isham G. Searcy;	Quartermaster-general	Samuel F. Love.

(Brigade officers not named)

The Carr murder was at length traced to a small party of vagabond Indians roaming the country and did not prove to be the prelude to a general Indian uprising; the excitement abated, and the militia law of 1827 became in fact an authorization rather than an order. A popular sentiment arose, that the United States troops stationed at various places in Florida could and would take care of any general emergency. Communities in several instances, however, loosely organized undrilled parties, miscellaneously equipped with any weapon individually possessed, something on the order of "Vigilantes", for the protection of their respective localities solely. The Florida Rangers remained for many years the only regularly mustered company of militia in the Territory.

The first extensive call upon the "Florida Militia" was made just prior to the outbreak of the Seminole war in 1835; but it was directed to a phantom organization so far as military preparedness was concerned. The companies responding to this call were Volunteers rather than Militia in a military sense.

THE WILD TALLAHASSEE OF 1827

For nearly three years after Florida became a possession of the United States it had no permanent official capital. The system of government was to alternate the sessions of the Legislative Council between Pensacola and St. Augustine. This migratory arrangement was unsatisfactory from the start, and at the second session of the Council, held in St. Augustine in 1823, commissioners were appointed to select a permanent site for the capital of the Territory. They selected a place near the old Indian town "Tallahassi", about midway

between Pensacola and St. Augustine. The first settlers at the future capital arrived in April, 1824. They were two men, two women, two children, and a mulatto man, who brought their effects in a wagon. They built a temporary hut the day of their arrival. We do not know with certainty the names of these people. Soon, other parties came and the town started upon its career. In the Fall of 1824, the Legislative Council assembled there for its third session.

Three years passed before we get a glimpse of local conditions from published contemporaneous accounts. This was when the Leon County grand jury went on the war path in 1827, and in its report made the following presentment: "We are sorry to find that in Tallahassee, a horrible state of things has existed for some time. The most flagrant breaches of the laws have taken place. The civil authorities have in many instances been set at defiance; and the most riotous, immoral, and disorderly proceedings have constantly taken place. It is truly lamentable to see such occurrences in any civilized country, but that it has occurred at the capital of our Territory, where it is so particularly desirable to establish a character for morality and good order, is the more to be regretted. . . . We therefore recommend to the next Legislative Council, the passage of a law, laying a tax upon all retailers of spiritous liquors, except respectable houses of entertainment" - (*Pensacola Gazette*, Nov. 2, 1827).

A Contrast

Two years later. Tallahassee has a population of about 1000. One wing of the Capitol has been completed, and the whole building is under contract. There are two churches, an Academy, and two pri-

vate schools. There are three public houses of entertainment (hotels), besides several boarding houses; nine stores, two groceries, and but one grog shop, the rest having closed for want of patronage. The jail for some time past has been without occupants-(Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate*, Sept. 8, 1829).